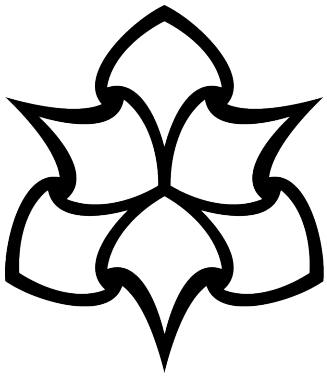

The Hero in New York
draft of a chapter in the forthcoming book *Assemblage & Empathy: American Art and Literature 1950-1969,* commissioned by Peter Lang, Bern.

'Six months after the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution was all but lost. A powerful British force had routed the Americans at New York, occupied three colonies, and advanced within sight of Philadelphia. George Washington lost ninety percent of his army and was driven across the Delaware River. Panic and despair spread through the states.' David Hackett Fischer notes, in *Washington Crossing* (2004), that 'Washington –and many other Americans– refused to let the Revolution die. Even as the British and Germans spread their troops across New Jersey, the people of the colony began to rise against them. George Washington saw his opportunity and seized it. On Christmas night, as a howling nor'easter struck the Delaware Valley, he led his men across the river and attacked the exhausted Hessian garrison at Trenton, killing or capturing nearly a thousand men. A second battle of Trenton followed within days. The Americans held off a counterattack by Lord Cornwallis's best troops, then were almost trapped by the British force. Under cover of night, Washington's men stole behind the enemy and struck them again, defeating a brigade at Princeton. The British were badly shaken. In twelve weeks of winter fighting, their army suffered severe damage, their hold on New Jersey was broken, and their strategy was ruined.'
(file///Washington's%20Crossing%20David%20Hackett%20Fischer.webarchive)

Emmanuel Leutze's painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY) idealises the scene of Washington's re-crossing of the river with the General at the helm of a long boat in the stance of a Napoleonic hero, indeed using Napoleonic portraits as his model.
(Leutze's image at: http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm)

Larry Rivers painted his version of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* in 1953, but his painting is not a simulation of Leutze's work, rather it is a critique of nineteenth century heroism, its portrayal of a worn-out concept, the loss of faith in the concept. What is positive in Rivers' painting is its dynamism or unsettled advantage of damage, its fragmentation and incomplete image production, its blurring of edges in and out of focus. That is, the painting exemplifies an active consciousness in the modern city, its new sense of heroism through artistic practice, its self-confidence and stride into the intangible or unforgiving, its bravado, its new heroic, nervous optimism and thus its post-experiential vulnerability and innocence.
(Rivers' image at: http://www.english.uiuc.edu/Maps/poets/m_r/ohara/rivers.htm)

Two years later, 29 November, 1955, and the painting has been anonymously donated to the Museum of Modern Art, New York and Frank O'Hara stands in front of it, upstairs from his MoMA desk, and writes: 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art':

'Now that our hero has come back to us
in his white pants and we know his nose
trembling like a flag under fire,
we see the calm cold river is supporting
our forces, the beautiful history.' (1972: 233)

The facture of the painting followed Rivers' studentship, the class of 1951 with Grace Hartigan, under tutorship of Hans Hoffman and Abstract Expressionism at its Greenbergian peak, its Cedar Bar confidence, the US American art machine as distinctive in a world market now shifted from Paris to New York (before its delivered display to Europe in 1958 with O'Hara as assistant curator).

Rivers' and O'Hara's heroism is ambivalent, necessarily so, but it can lift towards an appropriate sense of the vulnerable and the engaged, drawing attention to the future contingent upon an inheritance of damage, refusing the war machine, this all starts some while back, but in 1950s and 60s US America (and of course elsewhere) it shows many of the indicators of getting into stride, a kind of social duty. Rivers' Washington is a combination of Washingtons, with an apparently grey-bandaged skull wrapped above the eyes. The body resembles many of the elements in Leutze's Washington, but in reverse, and with the cape-coat opened out. Rivers maintains that he spent very little time paying attention to Leutze's painting, but did visit to see it in the Metropolitan, New York, 'I had only seen the Leutze once or twice and had never viewed it at any length or with any passion' (Rivers 1992: 312). The portrait however more resembles copies from Gilbert Stuart, a copy such as the almost-full-length standing portrait by an unknown painter of Washington in white breeches and yellow waistcoat, but a Washington, in Rivers, without the wig or head of hair Stuart represents Washington having, repeated on US American coins and bills. Rivers' Washington is suffering from the damage of the war.

Rivers 'sense of the new heroic is not Washington, but Rivers' attitude towards Washington and is confirmed by O'Hara's second stanza:

'To be more revolutionary than a nun
is our desire, to be secular and intimate
as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile
and pull the trigger.' (1972: 234)

In 'Round Robin', made at the time of his 'Sonnet to Larry Rivers & his Sister' in 1953, O'Hara refers to Larry Rivers when he writes:

'to him my affection's as pleasing as an insult
to a nun…' (1972: 139).

O'Hara's hero doesn't simply take the rebel position against the 'redcoat', he is both 'secular and intimate', his heroes are both more local and a matter of celebration; they are both the 'Hero as Poet' in Carlyle and the modern era's concept of celebrity. So much the latter that he controls his position and the position of those he celebrates; as Rudolph Valentino put it, just before his early death, 'A man should control his life. Mine is controlling me. I don't like it.' (Monaco 1978: xi). The examples of both the local and those celebrated in O'Hara overlap, at times become the same, and the examples, whilst they are numerous, are either personal to his life and friends in New York or particular to composers and artists elsewhere.

In the period 1951-55 O'Hara in his poetry, overtly in friendship, addresses New York artists Jane Freilicher (at least six times), Grace Hartigan (four times), Larry

Rivers (five times) as well as Alfred Leslie and Joseph Cornell each once; he also addresses New York poets including Kenneth Koch (four times) John Ashbery and Edwin Denby each at least once.

[Jane Freilicher ('Interior [with Jane]', 1951; 'A Sonnet for Jane Freilicher', 1951; 'Jane Awake', 1951; 'Jane at Twelve', 1951-2; 'Jane Bathing', 1952; 'Chez Jane', 1952; 'To Jane, And in Imitation of Coleridge', 1954; 'To Jane, Some Air', 1954),
Larry Rivers ('Walking with Larry Rivers', 1952; 'Poem' ["When your left arm twitches"], 1953; 'Sonnet to Larry Rivers & his Sister', 1953; 'Larry', 1953 and 'Second Avenue'),
Grace Hartigan ('Poem for a Painter', 1952; 'Portrait of Grace', 1952; 'Christmas Card to Grace Hartigan', 1954; 'For Grace, After a Party', 1954),
Joseph Cornell ('Joseph Cornell', 1955), Esther and Alfred Leslie ('Sonnet for a Wedding', 1952), Elaine De Kooning ('Anacrostic', 1954),
Kenneth Koch ('3 Poems About Kenneth Koch', 1953; 'For Janice and Kenneth To Voyage', 1954),
John Ashbery ('To John Ashbery', 1954), and Edwin Denby ('Edwin's Hand', c.1955).]

Contemporary with these addresses, O'Hara also celebrates a variety of modern composers and authors including Erik Satie, Arnold Schoenberg, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Maurice Ravel along with Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Mayakovsky and André Gide and the film star James Dean twice.

[Erik Satie ('A Homage', 1951),
Arnold Schoenberg ('The Tomb of Arnold Schoenberg', 1951),
Boris Pasternak ('Snapshot for Boris Pasternak', 1952; 'Homage to Pasternak's Cape Mootch', 1953),
André Gide ('Homage to André Gide', 1953),
Rachmaninoff ('On Rachmaninoff's Birthday', 3 versions 1953-54),
Mayakovsky ('Mayakovsky', 1954),
James Dean ('For James Dean', 1955; 'Thinking of James Dean', 1955).]

Rivers painting hardly uses the painting by Leutze beyond Leutze's title and thus the work's subject, but Washington features in both works, with a similar standing position with regard to the legs and body, with a differing orientation of the heads; in Leutze's painting the head strains to the right in a *contrapposto*, in Rivers' work Washington's head is almost facing forward. The situating of the figure is also different, but almost mirrored, that is, for instance, the vertical position, top to bottom of Washington's head is proportionally similar in both paintings (in Leutze 60% from the base, in the Rivers 65%) but horizontally they almost mirror, Leutze's figure of Washington is on the left-hand side, 40.5% from the left edge, Rivers' Washington is more to the right-hand side, 57% from the left-hand. The paintings do not have the same proportions of area, so such matters may seem arbitrary, but they are not arbitrary with regard to the position of the figure of Washington. The Leutze painting explicitly proposes a movement of boat from right to left emphasised by the direction of Washington's face, the diagonal flag pole and three almost parallel oars in similar directions; that is in the regressive dynamic, from right to left, causing the viewer to slow the dynamic of reading. In the Rivers' painting the dynamic is in the opposite direction. This is not made explicit by the main depiction of the boat, which is depicted without direction, nor by a flagpole, which is not present in the Rivers, but by a sketch outline of a boat, different from the one Washington is apparently standing in, which explicitly produces a diagonal from the right-hand corner towards the figure of Washington, a diagonal which is cut by the edge of the picture and which encourages the dynamic in the right to left 'reading' direction. This is an apparently accidental or damaged aspect of the figuration, but is, nonetheless, explicitly counter to the dynamic in Leutze's work.

Leutze's work is dominated by the long boat, the oarsmen and Washington surrounded by ice flows. Secondary to the heroic Washington, in the right-hand background a second and third boat, a rider on a white horse and a black horse whose rider is missing or concealed by the white horse and rider. In the left background a fading view of land. Bird forms and a hollow of light bleaching out sight of the sun indicate the sky, characteristic of nineteenth-century Romanic painting in such precedents as Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Guiding the People* (1830, Louvre Paris) and J.M.W. Turner's *Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge* (1843, Tate London).

In Rivers' work, apart from the indications of boats in the foreground, the drawn elements are on land. In avoidance of Leutze's narrative thrust, Rivers' painting remains unfinished and this has the effect of separating depicted passages or sections almost unconnected to each other. There is a general congruence of perspectival distance, but no willingness or evidence of its cohesion into one landscape or one spacetime. The top left-hand section includes a rider on a white horse in military dressage (similar to Anthony van Dyck's *Portrait of Charles I on horseback*, 1633, Buckingham Palace) and behind this a black horse with an incomplete drawing of its rider. In front of both horses is an incomplete drawing of a standing figure. In the almost top centre section of the painting, a bright yellow sun catches the top of the horizon. In the right-hand section some vegetation and three incomplete figures. In the lower left-hand section, a soldier with a second figure that overlaps him. The drawing of the soldier resembles one the soldiers in a Rivers' study drawing, owned by MoMA, which draws from a children's book illustrated with pictures of nineteenth-century U.S. American soldiers. In the centre right-hand section another soldier, also from the same study drawing, with a second incomplete figure behind him. This matches Rivers' statement regarding his school-day experience: 'When I began thinking about the subject, I thought mainly about the patriotic grade school plays I sat through or participated in. I never took them seriously, even at seven or eight years old, but I enjoyed them and still have a pleasurable feeling remembering the experience' (1992: 312).

In O'Hara's third and fourth, the last two, stanzas he addresses Washington:

'Dear father of our country, so alive
you must have lied incessantly to be
immediate, here are your bones crossed
on my breast like a rusty flintlock,
a pirate's flag, bravely specific

and ever so light in the misty glare
of a crossing by water in winter to a shore
other than that the bridge reaches for.
Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting
on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.' (1972: 234)

Clear about his position towards Washington, its historic weight on his 'breast' that has become 'ever so light', reaching for the shore that Washington Bridge does not

touch, that is across the Hudson River and not the Delaware. O'Hara holds his poem together with this declamatory address. Rivers is far more disparate and ambivalent.

The Rivers' picture is held together through its use of muted colour, mainly browns, yellows and greys, with a large passage of white smeared from the right-hand bottom corner diagonally up to the centre line above and then left towards the left edge interrupted by the incomplete painting of Washington. The latter stands out as a consequence of its interruptive depiction. The white has been applied like a wash over previous drawn work and has the effect of being decisive but unfinished.

Decision and incompletion are two of the prominent components of Rivers' patterns of connectedness, his aesthetic, in this painting. Simulation, in his use of aspects of Leutze's depiction of Washington's posture, the white horse's dressage posture and the children's illustrations of soldiers, gives early evidence of another component of this pattern of connectedness. It is an aesthetic that connects to, and deliberately references, precedents in the work of others and simultaneously provides a critique of these precedents. It, so to speak, celebrates aspects of the precedents in its direct reproduction of their reproduction from printed book or photographic form into the painted canvas. Rivers undermines the efficacy of this celebration in his partial duplication of the context and partial fragmentation of the context, in his painting's isolated completions and its general array of incompletion.

O'Hara addresses Rivers' painting again.

'… Anxieties
and animosities, flaming and feeding

on theoretical considerations and
the jealous spiritualities of the abstract,
the robot? they're smoke, billows above
the physical event. They have burned up.
See how free we are! as a nation of persons.' (1972: 234)

It comes as no surprise to find Rivers reporting that at the time he was reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-69). But as indicated above, the hero in both Rivers and O'Hara has been redefined. This has been done in at least two ways: the steady critique and reappraisal of the traditional heroes, the new acceptance of the artist as hero.

Rivers addresses the former in a number of paintings in the period, most notably in *The Next to Last Confederate* (1959, Mr. & Mrs. Guy Weill Scarsdale, NY, Hunter 17), *The Last Civil War Veteran* (1959, MoMA), *The Last Civil War Veteran* (1960, Private Coll. Hunter XIII), *The Final Veteran* (1960, Private Coll. Hunter 19) and *Dying and Dead Veteran* (1961, Private Coll. Hunter XII), all of which use a transformed simulation from reprinted photographs in *Life* magazine and newspapers. Contemporary with this work Rivers factures a new range of heroes and portraits, proposing the personal and local and the fellow artist or poet as the hero.

This critical appraisal of the hero is subsequently readdressed in *The Greatest Homosexual* (1964, The Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.), which simulates

Jacques Louis David's *Portrait of Napoleon* (1812, NG Washington, D.C.). Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is also part of a critical appraisal of heroic painting, of painting made with a confidence and stride in its use of figuration and scale. It is in this sense that Rivers becomes the potential embodiment of the heroic, not hero in terms of distinguished bravery, rather a characteristic of illustriousness. Rivers' work is in the western tradition of Courbet, Manet, Cézanne and Beckmann in its boldness and illustration of large themes elaborated by the social. Courbet achieved this in his *A Burial at Ornans* and in the *Studio,* Manet in his *Olympia* and in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe,* Cézanne in the series of the *Large Bathers*, and Beckmann in his triptychs and stage pieces. Each of these artists prepares Rivers for the larger sense of his subjects and designs. At different phases of his artistic work Rivers refers directly to major works by all of these painters. He does this explicitly in many of them, such as Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans,* Courbet's *Studio,* Manet's *Olympia*. He does this implicitly with other works.

The patterns of connectedness that produces *Washington Crossing the Delaware* draws from a range of contexts derived from a range of representations. The immediate referral, through its title, to Leutze's work, is disrupted by Rivers' choice of images that are different from those choices made by Leutze. At the same time Rivers' choice of this title puts his own composition into a potential for a larger statement than his local context and own circumstance would provide him. The disparity, of the incomplete collation of images, is provided with an empathetic engagement with the fragmented presentation of historic data and lack of assurance or conviction about all of the data. This sense of dislocation of space and time, encouraged by the collage of more than one spacetime, is made cohesive by the consistent use of the disparities. The damage in Rivers' canvas is part of the subject of the overall image, it is consciousness of that history without a crib, or rather a description of the history seen from a gathered set of fragmented or partial glimpses into Rivers' sense of the subject from his schooling and his recent necessarily incomplete image search. The patterns of connectedness that lead to the complex of iconography in Rivers' consciousness and studio-wall memory are engaged by Rivers' personal proprioception. These , so-to-speak, different discourses provide Rivers' meaning, where his displays of consciousness mismatch his aesthetic presentation, energised by that imperfection, demands its imperfection in order to proceed as successful.

Rivers' painting, in the context of its New York milieu, demonstrates heroism in a new age. It is in the face of monumental paintings and public gestures by Jackson Pollock and many of Rivers' Cedar-bar compatriots. It flies in the face of abstraction as in danger of retroaction. This is partly because Rivers demands to address a different strand of the western tradition, one that embraced iconography in which meaning was substantially derived through recognition of images. He makes clear the strand he is addressing through his title and its associations, he makes clear the damage through his own facture and un-repaired damage, particularly as this is informed by abstractionist facture. He becomes heroic in his daring to do this in a milieu where more comfort would have come from a range of abstractionist options.

In the larger cultural sense, Rivers' achievement lays the ground for a considerable range of changes to U.S. American, British and French painting in which the

iconography of image production in the viewer, leads to a new appraisal of modernist hope and melancholy, a reappraisal of the potentials for social change.

O'Hara's 'Second Avenue', written in the year Rivers completed *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, had already taken the whole debate up several notches and had carried Rivers with him. The eloquent strident use of poetic language in the first three lines introducing the poem 'Second Avenue' demonstrates O'Hara's high competence already in 1953 and encourages the complexity of a new heroic vulnerability that encompasses or is recoded by the combination of conceptually understood modes of Abstract Expressionism and damaged details of description or simulated figuration. It's as if O'Hara was in the Cedar Bar, informed by chance ('diced') happenstance and chopped-up, fragmented ('diced') experience of 'excesses and sardonics' and then coupled to a conceptual understanding of locality, proximity and thought or address to someone else in the future, 'staring at the margin of a plea …'

In fact O'Hara notes he was part of the time in Willem de Kooning's studio, Larry Rivers mentions O'Hara writing part of the work in his Second Avenue studio in breaks between poses (O'Hara was posing for a sculpture Rivers was making and some of the drawings of O'Hara from these sessions are shown in Hunter, 1989). He is also at other times in his apartment with Joe LeSueur and at another in front of a Grace Hartigan painting.

O'Hara's use of crisp vocabulary and vibrant conceptions is sustained for most of the eleven pages (in the Totem Press edition) without, or rarely without, exception. From the use of 'to vend' to the use of 'fabulous' to describe 'alarms of the mute' permits a swing to and in the course of reading, from expecting one narrative order only to experience a different order. Elements of the swing are a consequence of collage facture and sometimes therefore encourage a surrealist juxtaposition as consciousness shifts realities from one spacetime to another, from the colour of light reflected pus on a collar which 'lingers like a groan' to 'a reproachful tree' whose needles (and here O'Hara drops into romantic metaphor typical of expressionist practice) 'are tired of howling' as if that is the needles of a tree were in pain or capable of vocal expression, but apart from this anthropomorphism, it is as if the sound that O'Hara recalls or imagines or invents was here simulated hearing.

In 'Second Avenue' the reader can experience O'Hara's facture directly, almost as if a, metaphorically speaking, a stream or flow of his consciousness, interrupted by urban events or shifts of spacetime leading to shifts in patterns of connectedness. The geological shift of 'newspaper of a sediment' then 'going underground' and then switching to the explicit metaphor 'discovering something in your navel that has an odor and is able to fly away' which combines the local experience of dropping from a New York street to the subway with the description of O'Hara's personal physiology shifted into figurative and then imaginative spacetime 'able to fly away'.

He addresses compatriots in the bar (or in the artist's studio, the poem was originally addressed to Willem de Kooning). 'I must bitterly reassure the resurgence of your complaints for you, like all heretics, penetrate my glacial immodesty,/ and I am a nun trembling before the microphone/ at a movie première which a tidal wave has seized the theatre/ borne it to Siam, decorated it and wrecked its projector.' In the process of

the address he notes how his proprioception is engaged ('penetrate my glacial immodesty') and opens his vulnerability and his expressionist (romantic) mode clips in ('a tidal wave has seized the theatre') from which O'Hara's imagination or a collaged element from a film or newspaper carries him from Siam and so forth in the cinema. And like his earlier referrals in his 'Sonnet to Larry Rivers and his Sister' and in 'Washington Crossing …' O'Hara notes 'and I am a nun trembling'. It is at this point that Rivers' use of what he came to name 'common image' and which Lawrence Alloway named 'pop art' comes to the fore in 'Grappling with images of toothpaste falling on guitar strings' cut against *War and Peace* or rather American Civil War, 'the lance of an army advance above the heat of the soldiery' (in section 1). Later (in section 10), 'a guitar of toothpaste tubes and fingernails, trembling spear!' This build-up of connectedness begins to demonstrate a painterly method, redolent of de Kooning. This use of post-Cubist collage is transformed by O'Hara's use of verbal dexterity in a series of inflated figurations and incongruent adjectival and adverbial combinations demonstrated at the beginning of section 2 in 'What spanking opossums of sneaks are caressing the routes!' This process permits the 'apparently' incidental facture of a pattern of connectedness. The sudden juxtaposition of natural features 'golden efflorescence of nature', 'the clarity of blossoming trees' in tow with 'Dice!' and chance juxtaposition which O'Hara summarises in his last spatially separated line in section 2: 'as a gasp of laughter at desire, and disorder, and dying.'

In 'Second Avenue' O'Hara demonstrates the transitions towards and away from an iconography, range of images, towards and away from an abstraction where the words in sentences shift from syntax to incomprehension or in and out of different levels of meaning and nonsense, realism and surrealism. The address also shifts from his debate with Elaine de Kooning in section 8, leading straight to Willem de Kooning in sections 8 and 10, which overload with simulation of one of de Kooning's *Woman* paintings 'recently seen in his studio' (O'Hara: 1972: 497) in 1953. 'o Gladstone! and your wife Trina'. The section had been preceded, in section 1, with 'your lips are indeed a disaster of alienated star-knots/ as I deign to load the hips of the swimming pool, lumber!/ with the clattering caporal of destiny's breast-full,/ such exhalations and filthiness falling upon the vegetables!' The description reverberates into other parts of the poem in terms of image and in terms of poetic language. In Larry Rivers Second Avenue studio, posing for a sculpture Rivers was making of O'Hara, he shifts in his discussion with Rivers saying, 'Now the features of our days have become popular, the nose/ broken, the head bald, the body beautiful, Marilyn Monroe./ Can one's lips be "more" or "less" sensual?' The patterns are those found in de Kooning's painting and to the advancing ideas of simulation and 'pop' art raised above. But the discussion also relates to the new hero, the celebrity and this is even confirmed by the reference a few lines earlier, 'The Heroes,/ by John Ashbery'.

Later in 'Second Avenue' (section 10) O'Hara celebrates the work of Grace Hartigan in which, 'Grace destroys/ the whirling faces in their dissonant gaiety where it's anxious,/ lifted nasally to the heavens which is a carousel grinning/ and spasmodically obliterates with loaves of greasy white paint…' In 'Second Avenue' O'Hara builds up a clientele, a coterie of new heroes in New York, artists and lovers, local to O'Hara's sensibility and needs, and in radical juxtaposition to his syntactic precedents in the work of Hart Crane.

From one perspective the shifts in sentence content, the rapidity of to and fro, the shifts from present active to past or future tenses produces the ground for abstraction. The field of activity, the overall effect, resonates with aspects of colour field, but more stridently aspects of all-over painting in action techniques used by de Kooning. This may seem too obvious in the light of O'Hara's initial address and his subsequent addresses to painters Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan and partner Joe LeSueur; O'Hara achieves this all over effect with a variety of techniques including running with a verbal collage of words and phrases to, in section 11, the last section, an improvisation of addresses. At the end of his 'Notes on *Second Avenue*' he writes, 'Where Mayakovsky and de Kooning come in, is that they have both done works as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar.' (O'Hara: 1972: 497)

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